Part One

Personal Disciplines

Chapter One

Death

The Discipline of Personal Transformation

"If what you're saying about emerging culture is true, how should I change my church?"

A question like this seems almost inevitable when I speak to groups of ministers. A few seconds of silence usually follow as the others in the room dial in their full attention to hear my response. In their minds, they have paid to come to the conference for this moment, for my "deliverable." The second almost-inevitable question is, "What's working really well in the innovative churches you have visited?" The questioner here determines to elicit a set of best practices that could be imported into her or his ministry.

The commonsense pragmatism driving these questions elevates ministry *technique* as the starting point for thinking about mission. "How should we do our worship services?" the anxious, balding pastor asks me. Softly, I reply, "You may be asking the wrong question first." My answer, hopefully, suggests a more difficult but more primary question: *How can I be changed so that others will find me worth following in mission?* The way to develop a missional ministry, then, is to be transformed into a missional person, "so that everyone may see your progress."[1] In the end, my best practice must be me.

The priority of the interior life defies conventional attempts at documentation. But I have seen it and lived it. In fact, virtually every influential leader I know in the Emerging Church points to a crisis of personal transformation as a major source of ministry to postmoderns. This chapter relates some of my own journey from teenage convert through the wilderness of professional ministry, and back out to missionary-in-training. A pattern emerges in the narratives that follow: new life often emerges from some kind of death. The kind of spiritual renovation that forms a missionary's heart defies every attempt at reduction to a formula, or franchising as a "model." But there is a common confession, along with Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."[2]

I call these small "crucifixions" *paradigm crashes*. A paradigm expresses my basic orientation toward how the ministry works; it is my "operating system" of unspoken premises that runs in the background unattended. Most of us simply assume our paradigms, just as we assume our breathing. A crash happens when pain makes the frailty of those assumptions impossible to ignore, just as an asthma attack makes breathing the most important thing in life for a few minutes. Sometimes violent, sometimes gradual, paradigm crashes create an opportunity for God to take me off road, awakening me to mission by crucifying aspects of my culture, leadership, and spirituality that, unbeknownst to me, need to die.

Nuclear War and Other Problems: The Cultural Paradigm

I learned early in life that the world is a very serious place. My parents seemed more worried than normal, not surprising given the news reports about the Soviets having positioned nuclear missiles in Cuba for a sneak attack on the United States. Later I would learn to call this episode the "Cuban Missile Crisis"—just one of many crises in my Cold War childhood. In school, we pored over creased copies of *Life* magazine searching the photographs and drawings for clues that might explain why the end of the world was at hand. Living in Pittsburgh, the home of the American steel industry at the time, we knew that somewhere on a wall in the Kremlin there hung a map with a red bull's-eye printed on our zip code.

Of course, a sixth grader doesn't really possess the coping skills for an apocalypse, so our elementary school tried to ease the stress of my nuclear youth with a strategy something like a nuclear fire drill. Under our teacher's direction, we filed out of our home room into the long linoleum corridor. Our defensive doctrine required the student body to be formed into a human phalanx by lining up half a dozen twelve-year-olds so close to the wall that their foreheads touched the cool beige tile. The rest of us each put a forearm across the shoulders of one of these anchor students, and then rested our forehead on it. This process continued until every student's forehead-on-forearm combination connected to the shoulder blades of another student to form a rough square about five sixth graders on a side.

Oliver, Jeff, Wendy, and the others practiced the atomic phalanx with me over and over, until forming a bomb shelter made of flesh required little effort. To add emphasis to our training, we froze for a moment in the forehead-on-forearm position, as if bowing our heads together in a moment of mass prayer, last rites for the atomic age. The idea behind the phalanx seemed simple: if enough sixth graders assembled, a few of us in the middle of the formation might survive the blast and heat produced by the first shower of ICBMs. After that, I guess we were all on our own.

Eventually, our bomb-shelter-made-of-skin exercise started to get to me. Even as a twelve-year-old, I knew too much—too much *Life* magazine. Everything ended after a full-scale nuclear exchange. It was flash—agony—darkness. In fact, the temporary survivors inherited the worst of it, so why rehearse fantasy defensive scenarios? If the Nike missiles and Delta fighters that guarded the skies over our city missed even one inbound Soviet weapon, our pitiful student formations only rearranged the casualties.

The truth arrived, like a sneak attack, several years later: somewhere, someone with authority believed that, if the worst happened, sixth graders should at least be melted into the linoleum in perfectly straight lines. Proper "deportment," as our teachers called good conduct in those days, demanded compliance to the very end.

Like Dorothy and her friends in the *Wizard of Oz,* my glimpse of the man behind the curtain changed everything. The people I trusted (parents, teachers, presidents) asked us to face Armageddon wearing armor with only two layers, polyester and skin, while they hid like Dr. Strangelove in bunkers beneath mountain ranges. From their hideouts, in a fit of rage or a moment of miscalculation, they might even end the world I counted on them to maintain. The phalanx exercises served to keep us all distracted and deceived, preempting any questioning of their motives or their right to lead. The madness of it all began my personal postmodern turn, otherwise known as the sixties.

Crucified Culture

The trauma of the human bomb shelter concealed a gift. The society I knew as the ground of all being looked different to me now, filled with contradictions, flaws, and corruptions. Blind devotion to the values of conservative, modern, Anglo suburbia began to feel like dedication to the idea of a flat earth. Ironically, Christians question me at times about the danger of the Church being corrupted by twenty-first-century culture, fearing dilution of the gospel and erosion of our values. The human bomb shelter experience tells me that our *culture of origin* (COO for short) already grips our lives in ways so subtle that Christians may actually embrace them as part of the gospel itself. However, attempting to exorcise the influence of our COO means either trying to live as something we are not (I *am* a suburban, Anglo male, and always will be) or using the look of another culture as the wardrobe for the same heart. This kind of superficial rebadging shows up at every conference I attend in the form of older leaders in buzz cuts and tattoos. Whenever you catch yourself wincing, you're probably looking at one of them. By contrast, missional leaders understand that their COO is only one way of being among many others, with both positive and negative elements; they know that our real "citizenship is in heaven."[3]

The pain of realization shows me the shortcomings and sins of my culture, revealing it as constructed on earth and not received from heaven. This truth allows me to love culture without being owned by it, to say with Paul that "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."[4] A missional life, then, means living as an inside-outsider, "not of the world any more than He [Jesus] is of the world."[5] Although the traumas that challenge my cultural paradigms vary greatly, each one affords an opportunity to bring my COO to the cross, revealing its true nature and creating the opportunity for God to renew me by making it more difficult to confuse my culture with His mission.

Fools and Dead Smelt: The Leadership Paradigm

The world we knew in sixth grade did end, but not as a result of a Cold War first strike. A new world gradually replaced it, and the symptoms appeared everywhere. In a recent comparison of traditional technologies with emerging peer-to-peer communication, *Fast Company* contributing editor John Ellis writes, "That idea—that the great all-knowing center broadcasts out to a sea of fools to shape their thoughts and opinions—is as dead as smelt."[6]

Unfortunately, no one bothered to tell me about this. All of my academic and ministerial training prepared me to assume the role of "all-knowing center." I never thought of those I led as a "sea of fools," but I definitely used some synonyms. Completing a Ph.D. in communication studies at Northwestern taught me to think of them as "audiences." Later, in the professional ministry, words such as "members," "volunteers," and "followers" seemed more appropriate somehow. No matter what I called them, my job as the leader was to occupy the center.

My pastoral training included three elements commonly found in my denomination: (1) the experience of growing up in a parsonage, (2) the mentoring influence of an older pastor, and (3) correspondence school studies focusing on the content of the Bible. Entering the ministry in my late twenties, I found this combination served me well, especially in the form of a senior pastor who was willing to take a chance on younger leaders. Under his leadership, our church experienced an exceptional season of growth for which our staff felt largely responsible. After all, we were the center.

In this quite successful situation, my training and experience began converting me into a new sort of insider. This time the influence came not from Cold War suburbia but from the Church that rose up to serve it. I purchased the wire-rimmed glasses, a reddish Bible with twin ribbon markers, and a suit-and-tie combination that resembled those of my favorite television preachers. When I look at photographs of myself from that era, I wonder who I was then, dressed like one of the politicians who give speeches to no one on C-SPAN, dressed in Saul's armor.

My graduate student's jeans and long hair left behind, I conformed to the mainstream of my organization, which viewed such tokens with anxiety and suspicion in those days. (After all, leaders at the center dress as befitting their role.) By way of example, peer pressure, and positive reinforcement, I felt myself melted down and poured into a mold that someone thought represented the ideal pastor, at least in the look-and-feel dimensions. The depression I experienced during this time warned of danger, but I lacked the readiness to listen—yet. In fact, church culture never had a more enthusiastic hostage, the main reason being practical: my training claimed to provide a permanent stockpile of wisdom from which to draw for the rest of my career, guaranteeing a place at the center from which to serve the masses not privy to these divine resources.

Then the real world happened. My wife, Janet, and I assumed our first senior pastorate in a small church, populated largely by baby boomers, in coastal Maine. We experienced the usual trauma that accompanies leaving a somewhat sheltered staff position in a larger congregation for the lead role in a much smaller place. It hurt. But our training equipped us with the strategy that was supposed to produce results. We assumed that this ministry paradigm (three weekly services, fast songs before slow songs, altar calls, holiday musicals) must have God's favor because virtually everyone used it. We arrived in the full expectation that, if we implemented the official tactics, the official results would materialize automatically. We liked the center, because it featured these tidy principles of cause-and-effect.

But our Mainers seemed to have missed a meeting somewhere. An influx of ready-made church members arriving to work at the local shipyard produced growth, but even this ended in a devastating internal conflict that reversed our upward trend. After preaching and praying to almost empty seats during evening services, I finally started to get the message: the ministry formula we were using, the one that kept us at the center, simply failed to function as advertised in this place and time. People of good faith who understood their times developed it, but none of them served here. Until half-way through our tenure, I despaired many days over my congregation's failure to get it; now I understand them as very gracious, giving *me* the time to get it.

Crucified Leadership

The sure and certain knowledge of exactly what to do with a congregation was the most rewarding part of leading from the center. The paradigm involved time-tested principles, with high-profile churches actually offering conferences on how to use them. The thousands of other congregations that struggled while using the same formula got a hearing only as examples of poor execution or weakness in leadership. That worked for me until I became the pastor of one of those congregations and experienced the self-esteem cave-in that accompanies this kind of paradigm crash.

The pain of failure, experienced when I turned off the lights in the empty sanctuary because no one showed up, became another gift. Though my own personal insecurities and limitations were certainly sufficient to avoid success, in the end the grip of the one-size-fits-all paradigm had to be broken by the crisis of declining numbers and church conflict. One afternoon, I sat at my too-big pastor's desk on the second floor of our church building, staring at a pile of brass keys. The keys had two things in common: all of them fit the front door of our church building, and the people who were leaving the congregation during our crisis season placed them all in my hand. I scraped the keys off my desktop into a drawer and closed it.

Burying the church keys in their plywood tomb formed the darkest moment of our first pastoral experience. All of our dreams lay dead, and all our tears and prayers failed to resuscitate them.

The pain masked the fact that failure served me well by crucifying the conceit that I had the ministry figured out and that I was able to administer this model simply by virtue of my office as the source of all wisdom. Jesus did not construct an auditorium and demand that people come to Him. He went to them. Failure challenges the survival of ministry templates that ask culture to meet us on *our* terms. Rather than drawing people to the center, a missional life means Jesus sending us outward, as the Father sent Him.[7]

Eventually, I listened to our congregation enough to understand that they actually needed an informal church, with a light schedule focused on home group activities rather than my sermons. This idea felt almost like heresy, but we did it, and the health of the congregation improved dramatically. I got to know the congregation all over again, my pastoral counseling dropped to almost nothing (it turned out they just needed friends, not me!), and I experienced the joy of having time to pray and study. We experienced more ministry by doing *less*. In fact, the further I moved from the hub, the healthier things seemed to get.

A missional life, then, experiences the centrality of Christ as our failures expose the illusion that we merit the center position. Failure, among other forces, reveals this illusion for what it is, crucifying it and giving us the chance to invite Christ to assume the central role in practice, instead of just in doctrine.

Third Way: The Spirituality Paradigm

If only the lesson had proven enduring. Janet and I moved to coastal Florida, and in our second congregation we served builder generation retirees, immigrants from churches "up North." Having grown up outside their generation and denomination, I struggled to empathize with their nostalgic preference to emulate the Pentecostal worship experiences of the 1960s and 1970s.

After two years of executing the suit-and-tie, three-weekly-services template, I found myself one morning sitting in a pancake eatery in northern Florida, telling Janet that the thought of enduring years of a station-keeping ministry broke my heart. Very few people came to faith, larger churches full of young people outcompeted us for talented members, and stability always trumped my other priorities. What had I become? The reckless Jesus freak of my twenties now looked like a shrink-wrapped, right-from-the-factory, 1980s preacher.

After we finished our pancakes, I yielded to her request that we drive past a church in Pensacola to perform a brief reconnaissance of a congregation experiencing what would come to be called the Brownsville Revival.

Despite my mental (and sometimes verbal) reservations, I found myself immersed in the experience again and again, coming to realize that my own initiative occupied the heart of my ministry. My main vocation focused on maintaining the church culture preferred by our members, and occasionally hoping to secure the board's cooperation for some small tweak. The revival began a season of repenting and realigning our priorities around mission. Janet and I knelt together at a pew in Brownsville, telling the Lord we would do "whatever it takes" to be involved in the real thing, regardless of the cost. This new passion and perspective, and the experiences that accompanied it in those days, met with a mixed response from our congregation, but our focus had changed, and going back held no appeal. We were ruined. Once again the world ended, this time in an old school way: by divine intervention.

Then my denomination offered me a position in our headquarters city of Springfield, Missouri. I accepted, but fifteen months later a congregation in the same city, composed largely of young adults, elected me as their senior pastor. Strongly influenced by the Pentecostal renewal movements of the mid-1990s, our very experiential Sunday services incurred the disdain of some of the religious leadership in the community. But the center no longer had my name on it, and formulas lacked the power over us that they once did. We even made some progress on the look and feel dimension, abandoning suits for corporate casual (radical in that context) and putting everything on a first-name basis.

It was supposed to work. Pentecostals believe in religious experience the way electricians believe in electricity: without it, we have no reason to show up for work. The Spirit moves in profound and observable ways, and our heritage teaches that most everything else just takes care of itself. But our congregation's story failed to line up with what our movement's culture taught us to expect. At one public rally, for example, the only "testimony" from two years of renewal came from one person who thought he might have quit smoking. In my mind, although the renewal brought significant fruitfulness in regard to the worship climate, personal spirituality, and missionary focus of the church, we struggled to identify results in terms of people coming to faith, discipleship, and the like. Was this just another formula, another center? Was my role only to maintain the conditions under which renewal could continue, perpetuating a new version of maintenance church? Even for a naturalized Pentecostal like me, this kind of thinking felt almost treasonous.

Crucified Spirituality

Christians often wait years, or even a lifetime, for the onset of a revival, however defined. After putting in our time, I found myself in this environment, facing a packed auditorium rocking with young adults worshipping God. One particularly dramatic morning service adjourned at 4:30 P.M. But at 4:31, we still faced a long agenda of unsolved problems, and the same questions about tangible fruit. Pentecostal culture sometimes does not permit us to say this out loud, for fear of compromising our emphasis on religious experience as transformational. But I knew the facts of our situation refused to be reduced to experience alone. My naïve faith in unassisted spiritual encounters turned into a search for answers.

The pain of complexity exposes my incomplete understanding of God's ways—the very paradigm most associated with ministers!

Acts 19, for example, tells of Paul meeting disciples at Ephesus who knew only the teachings of John the Baptist and professed total ignorance about the Holy Spirit.[8] Rejecting Paul's teaching and clinging to the repentance-based message of John offered an easy way out. Instead, they opened themselves to a more complex reality and were filled with God's power.

Our congregational culture's tendency to feature experiences disproportionate to results sent me looking for something more. Ironically, Christians assume "more" happens as an inevitable consequence of revival. Soon I heard voices advising even greater experience as the remedy for my problem. But others saw experience as the problem and counseled a healthy dose of pragmatism clothed in suburban respectability. In other words, the conventional wisdom forced me to choose between being a hyper-Pentecostal and an ex-Pentecostal. Both options sounded like substituting a new formula for old.

Living a missional life often means finding a third way, the one outside the boundaries of a facile either-or choice. The hunger for this kind of path brought me into doctoral studies in leadership, which produced a structural overhaul of our church, somehow blending organizational theory with old school intercession. I realized in the process that renewal offers not so much an answer as a question: Why have we been awakened, and what are we prepared to do about that? A third-option church became our answer, one that included a funky, mismatched set of traits reflecting our funky, mismatched collection of gen Xers and senior citizens and the surrounding neighborhood.

We learned the necessity but insufficiency of experience. Few came to faith in our ministry, not because of extremes in our spirituality but because those people seldom attended our services, classes, or anything else. Spiritual seekers in our community simply did not share our assumption that, if a revival broke out at a local church, everyone in town attended. As a result, our spiritual renewal burned brightly in services that only church folks attended and only insiders understood. So with all the best intentions, we succeeded in hosting a more enthusiastic rendition of the center.

It took all of two years to see things begin to change, as we learned how to integrate ministry processes into our understanding of God's power. The exact nature of our revised church is less important than the fact that we embraced a more complex reality in which the ministry moved away from a maintenance mode to a missionary understanding of our role in the city. This transition of perspective drove the changes in the church's structure and ministry. The church started a journey of transformation, in part, because I started the same journey. One Sunday morning, I watched from the pulpit as the first two people indicated their openness to a new faith. With almost no exceptions, I witnessed the same thing every Sunday afterward.

My Best Practice Is Me

In the transition to the missional life through off-road disciplines, my best practice must be *me*. My generation (boomers) tends to look for a better tool, a better model, a better technology, and we have brought this preference into the Church. We like to transform things technologically, thinking of ministry as an instrumentality, ourselves as CEO, the Holy Spirit as a sort of power cell, and the church as an object we modify. In so doing, we risk creating not much more than a hipper version of irrelevance. A missional perspective springs from a transformed interior life that gives us moral authority to lead God's people, "not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."[9]

It hurts. Realization, failure, and complexity are only examples of the kind of pain signifying that something within me needs to die, that one of my cherished paradigms teeters on the edge of an off-road crash. My culture is unmasked. My methods are neutralized. My assumptions are shattered. In it all, God calls me out of the center that He alone rightfully occupies, to let go of things I treasure, to meet Him among the marginalized where He is always most at work. I will meet Him there most profoundly if the transformation of my inner life is at stake.